

Ernst Kitzinger

1912–2003

Ernst Kitzinger died at his daughter's home at Poughkeepsie, New York, on January 22nd, 2003, at the age of ninety. More than any other person, he was responsible for creating at Dumbarton Oaks the world's foremost institution for the study of Byzantium. He also left a legacy of scholarship on early medieval and Byzantine art that is both innovative and deeply researched. And he has left a large number of students, both official and unofficial, who treasure his mentoring with gratitude and admiration.

Kitzinger was born into a cultured Jewish family in Munich, whose Sunday-morning activities regularly included visits to art museums in that city. He decided to concentrate on the history of art when he entered the University of Munich in 1931. In the summer of the same year Kitzinger traveled for the first time to Rome, where he discovered Late Antique art and architecture. After the rise to power of the Nazis in 1933, and the consequent threat that they would soon ban Jewish students from receiving university degrees, Kitzinger completed his Ph.D. thesis within the unprecedented space of a single year, taking his final oral exam with his supervisor Wilhelm Pinder in the autumn of 1934. His dissertation was an analysis of the problem of the development of style in Roman painting from the early seventh to the middle of the eighth century, a problem that was to engage him for all of his life.

Late in 1934 Kitzinger left Germany. After a brief stay in Rome, he traveled to London, where he worked at the Department of British and Mediaeval Antiquities at the British Museum, under the sponsorship of the Keeper, T. D. Kendrick. He started out as a volunteer, but soon he was able to eke out a living on the odd jobs that Kendrick steered his way, such as writing book reviews for the *Journal of Hellenic Studies* (one pound per review), or preparing an index for five years of issues of the *British Museum Quarterly* (five pounds), or researching the carvings on St. Cuthbert's coffin for publication (ten pounds). In the last named project, which eventually came out in the collective volume on *The Relics of Saint Cuthbert*, edited by C. F. Battiscombe in 1956, Kitzinger proposed a new reconstruction of the wooden coffin, discovering that the twelve incised figures of apostles were originally arranged in the order of the litany of the canon of the Roman Mass. Kitzinger brought a Continental perspective to British scholarship of the 1930s, especially to the study of Anglo-Saxon art, which previously had tended to be treated in a somewhat parochial and antiquarian fashion. Kitzinger traveled with Kendrick throughout northern England recording and photographing Anglo-Saxon sculptures. This experience resulted in an important article which set Anglo-Saxon vinescroll designs in the context of

Mediterranean ornament (“Anglo-Saxon Vinescroll Ornament,” *Antiquity* 10 [1936]: 67–71).

In the spring of 1937 the British Museum sent Kitzinger to Egypt for two months in order to study Coptic sculpture. On his way back, he made his first visit to Istanbul, where the floor mosaics of the Great Palace were being unearthed and the wall mosaics of St. Sophia were being uncovered. It was also during this period, in England before the war, that Kitzinger wrote his most widely known book, *Early Medieval Art at the British Museum*, which is a guide not only to the collections of the museum itself, but also to the whole phenomenon of the transformation of antique styles into medieval modes of representation. This book achieved a great popular success, going through several successive editions in London and in Bloomington, Indiana, as well as being translated into German in 1987.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Kitzinger was working on the objects from the Sutton Hoo ship burial, as they arrived at the British Museum in a truck full of dirt fresh from the field. He used to describe how, in August of 1939, the excavated treasures came to Bloomsbury still enclosed in chunks of earth, just as they had been hastily torn from the ground, before they were cleaned, photographed, and put away for safe-keeping during the war.

In 1940 Kitzinger, who had been forced by the Nazis to leave Germany, was interned by the British authorities because he was German, and evacuated to Australia. He was detained there in a camp in the desert for nine months, but he put his time of imprisonment to good use by learning Russian from a fellow detainee. Eventually, the Warburg Institute obtained his release and he was able to take up an invitation from Dumbarton Oaks to come as a fellow. He arrived in Washington in the autumn of 1941 as a member of the second class of fellows, the first having been admitted a year earlier. At that time, Dumbarton Oaks had a resident faculty of scholars, of which Kitzinger soon became a member, rising steadily through the ranks. In 1946 he was appointed Assistant Professor, in 1951 Associate Professor, and in 1956 Professor of Byzantine Art and Archaeology. Meanwhile, he had been created Director of Studies, a post that he held with great distinction from 1955 until 1966. In his later life Kitzinger remarked that his forced immigration to the United States, in spite of the disruptions to his life that had preceded it, was the best thing that ever happened to him.

Intellectually, in its early days Dumbarton Oaks was a more hierarchic institution than it is today. The Director of Studies really did direct the studies of the junior scholars in the institution, prescribing what they should work on, and how they should carry out their research. As a younger fellow, Kitzinger had to negotiate between his own interests and scholarly inclinations and those of his successive employers. But the negotiation was fruitful, and resulted in some of his most important long-term projects. Under a system initiated in 1941 by Wilhelm Koehler, the so-called Archives project, Junior Fellows were expected to devote half of their time to an institutional research effort. Koehler’s aim was to gather the scattered information on excavated sites and materials from every country that had once been part of the Byzantine empire. Kitzinger was assigned to work on the Balkans. The immediate result of his researches was an article on the monuments of Stobi with their rich sequence of floor mosaics (“A Survey of the Early Christian Town of Stobi,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 3 [1946]: 81–161). More lastingly, Kitzinger gained an abiding interest in the style and subject matter of mosaic pavements, which resulted in several other

important studies written later in his career. He was one of the first scholars to investigate floor mosaics not merely as accessories to archaeology and as tools for dating, but as indicators of stylistic and cultural changes. In other words, he brought this material, which previously had tended to be beneath the attention of art historians, within the canon of art history, long before the study of “visual culture” became a recognized field.

A second Dumbarton Oaks project that became important in Kitzinger’s scholarship was the corpus of the mosaics of Norman Sicily. A. M. Friend, who became Director of Studies in 1945, conceived a scheme to study the mosaics in Italy that had been executed under Byzantine influence, because he thought that they would be able to throw light on the lost mosaic programs of Constantinople, particularly those of the church of the Holy Apostles. To this end, Friend sent Kitzinger to Sicily in the summer of 1949 to initiate a complete survey of the mosaics there. This project was to engage Kitzinger for the rest of his life. Friend’s interests in theology and in the relationship of images to Byzantine religious thought also helped to nourish Kitzinger’s engagement with the early cult of icons. Kitzinger acknowledged that his fundamental article on “The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm” (*Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 [1954], 83–150) owed much to the intellectual atmosphere of Dumbarton Oaks in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with its free exchange of ideas between resident philologists, historians, and art historians.

Once he himself became Director of Studies in 1955, Kitzinger was obligated to shift his time and his energies away from his own research to the demands of the institution. His task was to guide the transition of Dumbarton Oaks from a private foundation that reflected the interests and aesthetic enthusiasms of its founders into an academic institution of international standing. Kitzinger believed in Dumbarton Oaks as a place in which the highly centralized civilization and ideology of Byzantium could be studied in all of its interrelated aspects, an academic locus where the fields of history, literature, theology, liturgy, music, law, archaeology, and art history could together create an integral picture of this preeminent mediaeval culture. He viewed art and archaeology as central to the enterprise, because images occupied a position at the ideological core of Byzantine thought and society. He also understood Byzantine studies in their broadest sense, as embedded within medieval history and civilization as a whole; he did not draw narrow boundaries around the discipline, but included the study of lands that were in cultural dialogue with the Byzantines, whether Slavic, Near Eastern, or Latin.

As Director of Studies, Kitzinger put the publication program on a firmer basis, making the *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* come out annually. He was responsible for the creation of the photograph and fieldwork archive, because he felt that good photographs were fundamental to serious work in art history. He was also involved in the important fieldwork carried out by Dumbarton Oaks in Istanbul and on Cyprus. He organized two significant symposia, “Byzantium in the Seventh Century,” in 1957, and, together with Kurt Weitzmann, “The Byzantine Contribution to Western Art of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries,” in 1965, the latter growing out of his interest in the Sicilian mosaics.

During his years as Director of Studies, Kitzinger made a strong impression on those who passed through Dumbarton Oaks, particularly on the Junior Fellows, to many of whom he acted as a mentor. His personality, in which an overlay of shyness concealed a considerable strength, combined personal sympathy and kindness with rigorous and uncompromising standards. He was capable of interrupting his own work over the weekend,

in order to give a spontaneous tour of the collections to a couple of unknown undergraduates, who had turned up without warning at the front entrance of Dumbarton Oaks. And he could demand from a Junior Fellow repeated rewrites of a thesis or a paper, until every detail came up to his exacting standards. He shepherded the progress of the Junior Fellows, and often of former Junior Fellows, with extraordinary care and with close attention to their needs. During this period, Kitzinger also taught occasional courses in the Department of Fine Arts at Harvard, where he made lifelong converts to fields such as Anglo-Saxon art, early Byzantine floor mosaics, and the mosaics of Norman Sicily.

In 1967, after a year as a member of the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton, Kitzinger moved to Harvard permanently, as the first Arthur Kingsley Porter University Professor, a chair that he held until 1979, when he retired. In accepting the position at Harvard, Kitzinger turned down the offer of a professorship in Princeton at the Institute of Advanced Study. One of his reasons for this decision was that he hoped to be able to continue to play a role at Harvard in guiding the destinies of Dumbarton Oaks as a center of Byzantine studies, a hope that, in the event, was unfulfilled. He also wanted to be able to contribute to the formation of the next generation of scholars through his teaching, and to have the opportunity to give out some of the material that he had accumulated during his years of research at Dumbarton Oaks. During his twelve years at Harvard, in addition to teaching highly regarded courses for undergraduates, Kitzinger supervised some eighteen graduate dissertations in both western medieval and Byzantine art. His students are now leading specialists in fields as diverse as early Gothic manuscripts and stained glass, early Byzantine sculpture and textiles, Carolingian art, and late Roman painting and floor mosaics. It is a remarkable testimony to the breadth of Kitzinger's knowledge and the strength of his pedagogy that he could have successfully guided students with such diverse interests.

Kitzinger did not relax after his retirement. He took up fellowships at the Institute for Advanced Study in 1980 and 1982, and in 1989 he served as Visiting Distinguished Professor at the University of Seattle. In spite of problems with his eyesight, he continued to research and to write, producing several important articles, a comprehensive monograph on the mosaics of the Martorana in Palermo, and a publication in six volumes of photographs of Sicilian mosaics which had been taken during the campaigns he had organized for Dumbarton Oaks in the early 1950s. The last volume of the Sicilian corpus, together with its introductory text, came out in 2001, when he was 88. The products of Kitzinger's retirement years alone would be, for most scholars, the equivalent of a lifetime of achievement.

Kitzinger's eminent contributions to scholarship won him many honors. He was given honorary doctorates by Swarthmore College, by the University of Warwick, and by the University of Rome "La Sapienza." He was Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge in the academic year 1974 to 1975, where he gave the lectures that became his book *Byzantine Art in the Making* (London and Cambridge, Mass., 1977). In 1982 Germany made him a member of the order "Pour le Mérite," the highest distinction in humane studies in that country.

In his scholarship, as in his teaching, Kitzinger never considered himself to be a Byzantinist. Like other great scholars of his generation, such as Hugo Buchthal, Otto Demus, André Grabar, and Richard Krautheimer, his interests encompassed western as well as Byzantine art. His work was, in his own terms, both centripetal and centrifugal, that is,

both interpreting Byzantine culture on its own terms, and exploring how other cultures were interacting with Byzantium. He became convinced, very early in his career, that the study of Early Christian archaeology should be integrated with art history, and that the latter should be concerned not only with “high” art, such as the mosaics and frescoes on the walls of churches, but also with more mundane objects, such as the jewelry that people wore on their persons or the textiles that they used in their houses. He also felt that art, and especially its formal development, should be viewed as more than an ancillary aspect of history and literature, but as a basic communicator of cultural values in its own right.

For all of his scholarly life Kitzinger was fascinated by the problem of changes in artistic forms, and of the links that can be proposed between changes in visual forms and historical developments. Kitzinger wished to make style speak with the same authority as iconography and texts, and he liked to cite the popularity of modernist painters such as Kandinsky and the Abstract Expressionists to support his view that pure form has the ability to communicate. In the postmodern age, this view is out of fashion, yet no one articulated it with more eloquence and clarity than Kitzinger, and when the pendulum of fashion swings back again, his works will undoubtedly be central to a reconsideration of style.

The analysis of style in Byzantine art can be said to present the historian with an easier problem and a more difficult one. The easy task is to find the expression of known social, political, and historical factors in the forms of art. This problem was addressed by Kitzinger through the influential concept of modes, whereby different styles, even within the same image, reflected different categories of subject matter and function. The hard task is to define what artistic forms can tell us about a culture or a society that we did not already know from other sources—what the specifically visual can contribute to our understanding of an epoch. Kitzinger had already taken up this question in his Munich dissertation on early medieval Roman painting. It was to occupy him throughout his career, particularly in his studies of floor mosaics, where ornament often played as large a role as iconography. During his final years of teaching at Harvard he wrote *Byzantine Art in the Making*, which was a summation of much of his thinking about the dynamics of stylistic change in Late Antique and early Byzantine art. This work is not a study of the dialogue between art and texts, but rather a visual history of Late Antiquity, in which art is enabled to speak with its own distinctive voice.

Kitzinger was not only the master of the broad synthetic survey, but he also produced many important studies devoted to individual monuments and works of art. It was in these more focused studies that his capacity for painstaking analysis and attention to detail came to the fore. For example, his research established the authenticity of the much disputed Cleveland marbles, a group of miniature portrait busts and statuettes of Early Christian subjects that were acquired by the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1963. Although most of the leading experts in Roman art at that time considered them to be forgeries, on account of their unexpectedly “baroque” characteristics, Kitzinger was able to show that they are authentic works of the third century, thus greatly expanding our knowledge of the earliest Christian art, which hitherto had been known for the most part only from the paintings of the Roman catacombs and of the baptistery at Dura Europos. Kitzinger’s findings were initially published by William Wixom in the *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* in 1967, and then by Kitzinger himself in the *Atti del IX Congresso internazionale di archeologia cristiana*, I (Rome, 1978), 653–75.

Another of Kitzinger's most influential monographic studies may be mentioned here, if only to demonstrate the range of his scholarship. In 1949 he published an article in the *Art Bulletin* on "The Mosaics of the Cappella Palatina in Palermo." This article was not primarily concerned with style, but used the layout and iconography of the mosaics in the palace chapel to illuminate the presence and patronage of its royal patron, Roger II. It was a ground-breaking study of the manipulation of religious iconography by a medieval ruler in order to create a political program.

The passing of Ernst Kitzinger is mourned by his family, friends, students, and colleagues. His legacy remains secure, in his writing, in his impression on those he worked with, and in the institution that was so dear to his heart.

Henry Maguire